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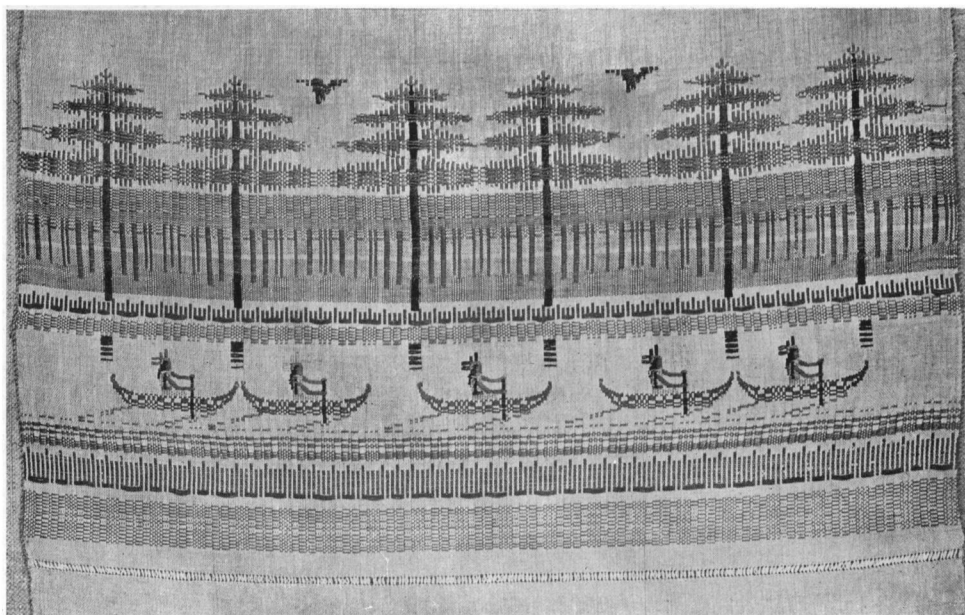
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AMERICAN INDIAN DESIGN EXECUTED BY BLIND WEAVERS

ARTISTIC TEXTILES BY BLIND WEAVERS

BY FREDERICK W. COBURN

UNTIL one has seen the little humanitarian drama its underlying story sounds incredible. Complicated, variegated, attractive textiles, woven by blind people of Massachusetts, have been appearing at recent exhibitions of the arts and crafts—at the Jamestown Exposition, in the traveling exhibition of the National League of Handicraft Societies, at North Shore and White Mountain resorts, at the Boston salesroom of the Perkins Institution for the Blind and elsewhere. Interior decorators, referring to such and such houses of the well to do, furnished or refurbished in accordance with an enlightened plan of securing things individual and exclusive, speak of engaging their hangings from the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind. At least one well-frequented picture gallery has for its wall covering, instead of the usual somewhat monotonous burlap, a varied and highly interesting woven fabric—a fine adaptation to a decorative end of the

old-fashioned rag rug. This work was done by blind weavers.

These admirable textiles—they are among the best of the kind made since the power loom put hand weaving out of business—are the outcome of a State's intelligent deploying of sightless labor, for the economic, physical and mental benefit of the workers. The example is not less stimulating than the same commonwealth's miracles of efficient agriculture and handicraft, performed by the chronic insane on two thousand acres of rough land at East Gardner. It easily invites day dreams of a universal industry, "for use and not for profit," standardized and perfected by scientific experts.

The living reality of the blind weaver's mastery of form and color appears, like most miraculous realities, externally commonplace, though moderately picturesque, when one visits the Massachusetts Commission's workshops in Cam-

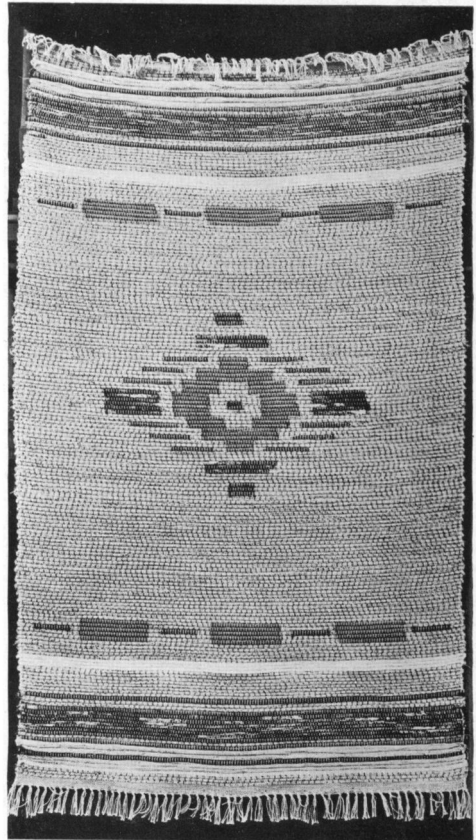
bridge—the one for blind women in a pleasant suburban house, evidently built just before the great decadence and set off with a panoply of shade trees; the men's workrooms situated in an ordinary business building on the main street of the "Port." Each shop is so like any other well-conducted shop, the craftsmen so alert and so apparently joyous at their tasks, that one forgets the gloom which work has temporarily dispelled for many of them—the unproductive night of a sightless dependence. Wages, which but for the State's intervention could not possibly be earned, opportunities for satisfaction of the spirit of service and of artistic creation—a kindly socialism, indeed, has been invoked in this as in so many other instances to safeguard the welfare of a group of citizens who more obviously than most need special protection. Under such a dispensation the sightless learn, truly, "how to be blind."

This making and selling of textiles under the auspices of the Bay State's Commission for the blind is no longer experimental. The possibility of producing goods which compete on their merits in the open market with the products of the factory system has been proved. It has been shown to be good business for the State to lift the curse of idleness from willing hands. All this has been done under the disadvantage of proceeding without capital (except for a small annual appropriation from the legislature), without borrowing capacity and with the same necessity that other manufacturers face of extending credit to customers.

The industry is still new. It was only in 1902 that the problem of the welfare of the adult blind of Massachusetts was first agitated by the Women's Educational and Industrial Union of Boston, resulting in the appointment in 1903 of a temporary Commission and, in 1906, of the first permanent Commission of its kind in the United States. Events have followed with the rapidity expected when a pressing social need has once been accurately defined: the opening of an experiment station for trade training of the blind, by a voluntary association of interested persons; the purchase of the station

in 1906 by the newly constituted Commission; the gift of the Cambridge house and grounds by Mrs. James A. Woolson, as a memorial to her husband for the benefit of blind women; the devoted labors in up-building the industrial department of Mr. and Mrs. Charles F. F. Campbell, lately removed from the State through Mr. Campbell's appointment as general secretary of the Pennsylvania Association for the Blind; the appointment as general secretary of Miss Lucy Wright, formerly secretary of the associated charities at Taunton; the opening of workshops in several cities; the recent formation of a National Organization for Prevention of Blindness and Conservation of Eyesight.

Continuously busy has been the report from the Cambridge shops during these



A RUG WOVEN BY BLIND MEN



AN ELABORATE DESIGN EXECUTED BY BLIND WEAVERS

and other happenings. The total wages earned by blind workers were \$8,182 in 1908; \$11,096 in 1909; \$13,762 in 1910, divided among 51 wage earners. The sales last year aggregated fifty thousand dollars. The market broadens; the rugs and other textiles now go to Chicago, Kansas City and elsewhere in the Middle West. Orders from interior decorators of New York and Boston increase in volume. The Commission is making a record for efficiency and service.

Much of the initiative in the early stages of the undertaking was supplied by Mr. Campbell who has acquired, and inherited, enthusiasm for this work from his distinguished father, Sir Francis J.

Campbell, principal of the Royal Normal College and Academy of Music for the Blind, London.

The visitor at the workshop for blind women, in the rear of the Woolson house, finds a couple of nests of looms, some of the Swedish type, which, however, have proved too light for many of the ambitious things now attempted, and others, small power looms readapted for hand weaving. Mr. James T. Cole, superintendent of the shops, is a practical textile man. Everything goes forward with economy of effort and materials. The mercerized cottons, linens and woollens which are prevailingly used are warped mechanically at the Lowell Textile School. The blind operator's job is to sit before the loom, throwing up now this, now that set of threads, and embroidering in her design, according to braille written directions. Mistakes in throwing the shuttle, misplacements of the colored skeins, which are arranged in numerical order close at hand, are very uncommon. A bit of untidy knotting is quickly detected and corrected by the deft fingers. Fringes are tied by hand with great accuracy. While most of the designs are worked out by a professional designer, Miss Carmela Valva, each blind weaver is encouraged to think out patterns of her own in the materials. Some of these designs prove commercially usable.

The output of the women's weave room, to which the somewhat unhappy term "art fabric" is applied, consist of draperies, bedspreads, cushions, towelings, bead-woven bags and many other articles, large and small.

Less of artistic delicacy, naturally enough, marks the work of the men's department, situated a few blocks from the Woolson house. The weaving equipment is here larger, with one great two-weaver loom, capable of producing a rug twelve feet wide. Behind this machine on an upright panel are two thousand or more warping bobbins—so many as to make one easily credit a blind operator's statement that a day or more of continuous work is required to change from a white to a black warp or vice versa.

The "Cambridge rugs" woven in this shop are primarily for distribution among the department stores and furniture houses—serviceable, harmonious of color and texture, the woof composed of strips cut from various bolts and remnants of dress goods. The very simple designs are made by the familiar process of inserting "spots" or little solid panels of colored cloth. These are dexterously applied by fingers unguided by sight. Wastefulness is tabooed; even the scraps are made up into the oddly mottled rugs known as "giblets," some of which are as brilliant as full-grown turkeys. A "Harvard rug" is among the Cantabrigian conventions, though it, truthfully, is less successful as an artistic achievement than its counter-

part, the black warped "Yale rug." The symmetry of the designs, which is said to be enforced by the selling conditions, offers a little commentary on American taste.

Were the efforts of these blind workers but moderately good in comparison with the output of sighted labor and were the compensation they receive more nearly nominal than it is the deployment of their abilities at creative work would still be very valuable as part of the economy of happiness. The extraordinary circumstance is, however, that so many of their textiles are of permanent artistic worth, ranking well up to the average of things made by other workers in the arts and crafts.



FUJI-YAMA ABOVE THE MISTS

NISHIYAMA HO-EN

PAINTINGS BY NISHIYAMA HO-EN

A SPECIAL EXHIBITION AT THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

THE first artist to modify Japanese art in the direction of realism was Maruyama Okie, who lived between the years 1753 and 1795. He established a new style in painting birds, flowers, insects, quadrupeds, etc., from nature; and,

establishing himself in Kyoto, then the center of conservatism in art, founded the Shijo naturalistic school, attracting to his studio a large following of the rising young painters of that city. Among the later apostles of the new school was